Mythopoeic Society MYTHLORE A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 1
Issue 1

Article 4

January 1970

'Which Way I Flie is Hell'

Gracia Fay Ellwood

Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien
Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021

Abstract

Taking as its starting point Milton's portrait of a Satan who creates deeper and deeper hells within himself as he continually rejects heaven, Ellwood demonstrates how a number of characters in the Chronicles of Narnia similarly deceive themselves and become—literally, in the case of some—blind and deaf to reality and the chance of salvation. Among them are Edmund, Eustace, Uncle Andrew, and the Dwarves in the Stable in *The Last Battle*.

Keywords

Hell in the Chronicles of Narnia; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Andrew Ketterley; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Dwarves; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Edmund Pevensie; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Eustace Scrubb; Self-deception in the Chronicles of Narnia

'Which Way I Flie is Hell'

by Gracia Fay Ellwood

In the first book of Milton's Paradise Lost, Satan attempts to collect himself and his dispirited followers by speeches proclaiming the strength of his own unconquerable self:

> A mind not to be changed by Place or Time.
> The mind is its own place, and in it self
> Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.

What Satan is celebrating is inner freedom, and there is of course a great deal of truth in his statement.

But Milton never forgot that the Devil is a liar. Or perhaps Charles Williams' phrase is better: Hell is inaccurate. In the fourth book of the poem, after encounter with the reality of Eden and the sun, Satan speaks with equal eloquence and greater honesty as he recalls the circumstances of his fall:

> "... lifted up so high
> I 'sdeind subjection, and thought one step higher
> Would set me highest...
> Forgetful what from him I still receivd
> And understood not....
> Me miserable! which way shall I flie
> Infinite wrauth, and infinite despaire?
> Which way I flie is Hell; my self am Hell;
> And in the lowest deep a lower deep
> Still threatning to devour me opens wide,
> To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heav'n.

The keywords here are pride, forgetfulness, self-deception. Satan falls by a free choice but increasingly loses his freedom as he becomes more and more the slave of his own perversity. He becomes hell. Thus hs certainly can make a hell out of heaven; but he cannot make a heaven out of hell.

We know from C.S. Lewis' other writings that he learned a great deal from Milton in this matter, and we can see that he enacted these insights in several of the Narnia stories. Examples can be found in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, The Magician's Nephew, and The Last Battle. The pattern is similar to that of Satan, and we will trace it in the following pages. Pride asserts itself, first through forgetfulness and later through suppression, of some very basic facts. Self-deception proceeds from vague half-truths to a perverse unwillingness to admit obvious truths. In two cases it develops even into negative-hallucinations--that is, total inability to see or hear physical realities. The result is the misery of a self-created Hell. In the other two cases, a strong, shocking reality is encountered which stops the process--as the sight of the sun and Eden almost did for Satan.

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe is the first of the Chronicles only because Lewis thought of it first; of course The Magician's Nephew ought to be number one. But since Edmund in the Wardrobe is the least developed of the self-deceived, he is

NC

a good place to begin analysis and comparison.

Before his first meeting with the Witch Edmund had had no warning of her nature--mostly as a result of his cruelty to Lucy and refusal to hear her story. But the first few minutes of their meeting made it quite evident that she was evil. She is harsh and imperious; Edmund did not like the way she looked at him. She insists on deferential treatment; when Edmund manifestly fails to understand her questions she replies, "I see that you are an idiot." Certainly the moment when she says, "he is easily dealt with," and raises her wand, eyes flaming, he knows who she is. When she suddenly changes her tone and expresses concern for him, he is not taken in. But the drink and the Turkish Delight make him forget things very fast: manners, the foolishness of eating candy by the pound, and especially the Queen's cruelty, the folly of talking freely to her.

Lucy brings some of these things back to his mind when she tells him what the Faun said about the supposed Queen; Edmund feels uncomfortable. But now he does not merely forget. He wants more Turkish Delight, so he suppresses this knowledge and begins to parrot the witch: "You can't always believe what Fauns say."

The effects of the enchanted food, and Edmund's assent to them, are beginning to create an inner hell of discontent in him by the time of the visit to the Beavers. Their house and dinner are not exactly heavenly. But the solid homely pleasures are thoroughly spoiled by his desire for more Turkish Delight and a chance to salve his hurt pride by lording it over the others as King of Narnia. He even imagines that they are deliberately slighting him. This had been true earlier, so that it is convincing enough now to enable him to carry off the self-deception.

During the cold walk to the witch's castle his self-deception is chiefly a matter of preventing his mind from going to work on what he had heard about her, and logically concluding what she would do to himself and his brother and sisters. He suppresses the conclusion by recalling that she had been "jolly nice" to him--again forgetting the first part of their encounter. Further on the suppression is carried out via fantasies about his promised future as King of Narnia.

When Edmund sees the Witch again these deceptions come to an abrupt end. Though this is not the end of his misery he is fortunate in coming so soon up against a reality painful enough to wake him to his own folly. From here on until his rescue, he is in an external hell only.

Eustace in the Dawn Treader takes a good deal longer to wake, partly because he is not in a position to do himself and others much damage as Edmund had been. Thus he is sheltered from similar consequences for quite some time.

Self-deception is not a matter of a rapidly unfolding series of events but a way of life for Eustace. He seems to have picked it up from his parents who pridefully seek to elevate themselves above "commonplace and tiresome" people by debunking anything pleasurable or old-fashioned; thus their teetotalism, vegetarianism, etc. When we first meet Eustace he has a long-established habit of calling pleasant things unpleasant.

In the opening scene he is ridiculing Edmund and Lucy about Narnia, and belittling the painting of the Narnian ship. Obviously he feels inferior to them and re- NC

jected by them, and is trying to build himself up. He takes Edmund's abuse with equanimity, however, and seems to find his own disagreeability quite agreeable. He does not really begin to create a hell inside himself until he gets into the semi-medieval Narnian world.

Eustace is the squarest peg imaginable in such a world, and of course he is unhappy. We can't blame him for this per se. Tastes differ; he has a perfect right to prefer the Queen Mary to the Dawn Treader. But his unhappiness is not merely a matter of being in an uncongenial setting. His habits of dishonesty have gotten the best of him and are making the situation considerably worse. Many examples could be given. Obviously Reepicheep is not a "performing animal," and does not give everyone "the most frightful cheek" (only Eustace). Lucy's cordial is not "beastly stuff." Caspian's expressions of sympathy for Eustace after the water-stealing incident are not "patronising," nor is he an "odious stuck-up prig." His gallantry in rescuing Eustace and the others from slavery hardly deserves contempt. Lucy's patient generosity deserves better than to be taken for granted. But Hell is ungrateful. "He had persuaded himself that they were all fiends in human form."

With Eustace, in contrast to Edmund, there is little or no development up to the time of his beastly experience (unless his taking to bed means that he is getting more sullen). All along he is forgetting, self-deceiving, blunting his own senses, and stewing in self-pity.

In the dragon episode Eustace meets his reality, finally in a form powerful enough to shout down his lies. The dragon body is of course a mirror for his bestial soul. Ironically, when his ugliness becomes physically visible to himself, it essentially disappears within. The rest of the time until his baptism by Aslan he is, as Edmund had been, in an external hell created by his previous attitudes and acts.

Uncle Andrew in The Magician's Nephew shows more development than Eustace. His vices are of a rather different order, although for both characters pride is central and self-deception is a long-term habit. He is power-mad. At first he is not so much given to deprecating good things as to admiring bad things. His fairy godmother Mrs. Lefay had been imprisoned for being merely "unwise" and because "people are so narrow-minded." His cruelty to the guinea-pigs and the children is only successful experimentation for which he deserves congratulations. His own cowardice in not trying out the rings is merely the prudence of the great adept who is necessarily above the morality of the herd.

His capacity for forgetting uncongenial facts is really astonishing. It is of course suppression. When he first meets the witch he is so frightened and upset he has to run for his brandy bottle; but barely out of the room he finds her a "dem fine woman," and begins to spruce up. His fear and his admiration alternate with her presence and absence almost like switches being turned on and off.

After he gets into Narnia his dishonesty is chiefly a matter of debunking good things. He is afraid of Aslan and wants to shoot him first thing. He dislikes Aslan's song of creation because of the uncomfortable thoughts and feelings it gives him, and tries to make himself believe it couldn't be a song, only a lion's roar. He succeeds and soon is physically incapable of hearing it or the talk of the other animals. This is reductionism with a vengeance.

From his success here we see how much deeper in hell he is than Edmund or Eustace. They could delude themselves, but not have negative hallucinations at will.

NC

They could be awakened by a strong painful reality. But neither the demonic reality of the witch nor the divine reality of Aslan can get through to Uncle Andrew.

The beauty of the new Narnia and its inhabitants is of course non-existent to him (although he does not hallucinate visually); they are crowded out by his own fantasies of exploitation. The fun and humor of his encounter with the talking animals he has turned into terror. "Such joy Ambition finds."

Oddly enough he does seem to have been half-cured by the whole experience; at the end we are told that he gave up magic and became less selfish in his old age. This seems too far out of character; I for one don't believe it! More convincing is his continued habit of bragging about his drive through London with that "dem fine woman."

The final example of the inner hell is the group of dwarfs in The Last Battle. Except for Poggin who leaves them to follow the king, they have no individuality; they more or less make up a single character which we can compare with the other three.

The Dwarfs' decision to go to hell is considerably harder for the reader to understand than Edmund's, Eustace's or Uncle Andrew's. Edmund was tempted by a strong enchantment, and Eustace and Uncle Andrew, we are told, had been creating inner hells for some time before we even met them. Little is said about the Dwarfs before the time Tirian and the others encounter them being marched toward Calormen and slavery. We know they must have felt grim and bitter about both their future and the past events at Stable Hill. Certainly then their sudden liberation should have lightened their spirits, at least. But they simply growl at Tirian and declare that they won't be taken in again. (Hell is ungrateful alright!) We can only infer that they too have been building their private hell for a long time. It is unfortunate that the author has not made more preparation for this surprising turn.

Pride is not as conspicuous in the Dwarfs' motivation as it is with the other three. It is implied, however; being taken in is humiliating, while being hard and skeptical and self reliant is admired (if not admirable).

The form their self-deception takes is also similar. Like Eustace they have only sour words for the good: for Aslan, for Tirian's act of liberation, for Jill's account of herself. At the battle words become actions and they kill all the Talking Horses. (Again we are surprised by the extent of the Dwarfs' depravity; we have been prepared for them to sit coolly on the sidelines, or walk off, but not to do anything this vile.) Unlike Uncle Andrew, they do not praise the forces of evil; they shoot the Calormenes as well. They are against everyone but themselves; "The Dwarfs are for the Dwarfs."

It is probably because they refuse allegiance to Tash as well as Aslan that Tash as well as Aslan that Tash does not come for them when they go through the stable-door of death. They get what they wanted--exclusion from all company but their own, and the blindness they insisted on. The resemblances between their experience and that of Uncle Andrew during the creation are notable. The sunlight and landscape, the kings and queens, the fragrant violets, the splendid feast are of course worse than absent.

We might notice that the only sense the Dwarfs do not block is hearing, while hearing is the only sense Uncle Andrew does block. This is probably due to circumstances. The Lion's song was the most conspicuously magical power in the creation scene; its beauty and goodness rebuke Uncle Andrew's misuse of magic. Consequently he negates it, and as a result the voices of the Talking Animals are also distorted. The Dwarfs on the other hand expected to hear voices in the stable, but not to see anything at all, or smell or taste anything good. "There's no Humbug here." They literally make "a Hell of Heav'n."

Edmund, Eustace and (in part) Uncle Andrew are all rescued from themselves; only the Dwarfs are permitted to go the full way, to self-damnation: the lowest deep, the still lower deep within. "Which way I flie is Hell; myself am Hell." NC